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WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL WITH REGARD TO COLLEGE REQUIREMENTS IN ENGLISH

THE study of English in the secondary school is, in a sense, a new departure. The time is not far behind us when reading, spelling, and grammar included all that was attempted in this line. And while little was gained that could broaden the pupil's mind or develop his capabilities, it cannot be denied that a greater efficiency was secured in other respects. The average pupil was a better reader, a better speller, and was possessed of a better knowledge of technical grammar than is the average pupil of today. In a word, there was a real foundation upon which to build, though a narrow one.

The lamentable condition of the English work in the secondary school today has occasioned widespread comment in no wise complimentary to school or teacher. And now in the interests of higher education, as a matter of self-defense, the university and the college are demanding that the secondary school shall come up to higher ground. Nor is this demand alone to the interest of the university and the college. It is even more to the interest of the secondary school and of the world at large that from the portals of the one into the stirring life of the other shall issue men and women better fitted, morally and intellectually, to take up the practical affairs of life.

The demand of the higher schools looks to a steady advance, along scientific lines, of all secondary work. And all secondary work is rounding out in response to this pressure from above. English, however, seems to respond more slowly than other subjects, and the purpose of this article is to discuss briefly some of the conditions that are responsible for its tardy advance in the high school.

The question is of interest to others than schoolmen. The ability to use clear, concise language, to clothe a thought in appropriate dress, to add whatever of adornment occasion

may require, to hurl an invective even with proper force when need arises, works literally for *righteousness*. Never to such a one comes the vexation of spirit that ruffles the whole inner being of the man who *would* speak, but *cannot*—who can in no way, even to himself, voice that which he feels. Such a limitation of speech is a bond stronger than iron to hold a man from coming into close touch with his fellow-men. It not only bars him from the world of letters, it makes him an alien in his own country.

Before entering upon a discussion of the conditions that retard the progress of the English work in the high school, it may be well to glance at the requirements which the university and the college are urging. In doing this I confine myself to the requirements as outlined in a pamphlet based upon the report of the Committee of Ten to the National Council of Education, and issued by a representative university as a suggestion to the teachers of English in the secondary school.

A knowledge of *grammar* that will be to the pupil a means of interpretation in his study of literature, and will enable him to criticise and correct his own composition; the treatment of the subject to be moreover “scientific, historical, comparative.”

Those points of *Rhetoric* which will furnish him with apparatus for investigation and criticism in his high-school work.

A *Word-Study* that will lead him to recognize the kinship of related words. A training that will enable him to gather all information concerning words that the dictionaries at hand may afford him, and a further training that will enable him to apply this information to a word in any given context “with a view to determine its precise value and force in that context.”

Two *Shakesperian Dramas*—to be considered from the “historical, the technical, and the literary point of view.”

About thirty poems—Lyric, Narrative, Descriptive, Reflective—“approached not only from the imaginative but from the historical side.” “To be so studied as to develop the great facts of chronological sequence and relationship in English literature, the distinct types and schools of poetry, and the characteristics of the great epochs and groups.”

Addison's *Essays* and Macaulay's *Warren Hastings*. The work in the first to be centered upon “the striking aspects of character and society” as there presented. The second to be made valuable “as an introduction to the modern style of direct and emphatic narration and description, and as a

stimulus to the study of character, morals, political problems, and history."

A study of *Classic Myths* necessitating about sixty lessons.

Three Orations—to be studied first, along the line of "their treatment of great and far-reaching questions in the light of universal principles," and second, in their masterly handling of argument.

Two *Novels*—Tom Brown; the Newcomes, or Silas Marner and Vicar of Wakefield, or Henry Esmond—which must be known thoroughly and studied as works of art.

A training in *Composition* with the threefold object of securing good mechanical form, free expression of thought, vivid action of mental powers.

These are the requirements of the University of California, which I have cited because of my sincere respect for this institution, and because its requirements represent fairly the requirements of other schools of like standing.

According to these requirements, "The aim of secondary instruction in English is to enable the pupil to write and speak with clearness, vigor, and grace; to acquaint him, at first hand, with a few of the best literary products of English and American thought; to cultivate a sense of literary style, and to inculcate a love for the best literature." Now when we consider that the course in the high school is at best but four years, and consider also the age of the pupil who is supposed to accomplish all these requirements, and that his working time must be apportioned among various studies, it appears at first glance that too much is demanded.

But let us turn our attention to the other side and determine what it is that causes the English work in the high school to lag behind what these requirements demand. In the first place, the average pupil in entering upon the high-school work, is not prepared for the work which he has to do. The university which I have quoted above states: "The most common form of deficiency among students who apply to enter a university—and not a few of these actually get in—is that they can neither read nor write." If this is true of the pupil who has left the high school, how much more serious must be the deficiency at the period when he applies for admission to that school. It is difficult to determine where to place the blame. But wherever the fault lies, whether in the method of teaching, or in the system that gives to the child during

the first eight years of his school life eight or more different teachers with varying capabilities and predilections, or in multiplying the subjects *touched upon* in his grade work and so scattering his energies that nothing is thoroughly accomplished, the fact remains the same. The average pupil entering the high school is far from being a good reader, can spell but fairly, and has so meager a knowledge of the simplest grammatical constructions that the teacher of higher English has little upon which to build. The tendency of grade work seems to be away from the idea that "thorough knowledge is the backbone of culture."

The value of the old-time drill ought not to be underestimated. May not a radical defect in our English work today be due to the fact that we have discarded the old method entirely to make way for the new? We have dug up the old, root and branch, instead of grafting the new bud of culture upon the thrifty stock of well-grounded fundamentals. The spirit of the old schoolmaster might justly retort upon the narrowness of our methods and smile in derision at the weak foundations upon which we are rearing our structures.

Another condition that enters at the kindergarten with the child and is allowed to accompany him through the grades and into the high school is the habit of incorrect speech, the result of association. It is a habit that the child has contracted during the most impressionable period of his life. It is so strong a habit by the time he has reached the high school that he is often unable to command his tongue to the proper expression even when he is cognizant of it. This, to be sure, is a condition which the grade teacher also must meet. But it is first met at an age when the child's forms of expression may be molded with comparative ease. And I am convinced that if unity of purpose throughout grade work made language, as it ought to be, the basis of all other work, the child would emerge from his eight or nine years in the grades with the ability at least to express himself in comparatively correct form in spite of all outside association.

Another condition that blocks the progress of the work is

that when the pupil enters the high school he is at an age when his faculty of appreciation is almost wholly undeveloped. It is the dawn of manhood and womanhood, and the unconscious effort of the child to emerge from this chrysalis state produces a restlessness that needs not restraint, but direction; an enthusiasm that needs not curbing, but a proper object upon which to expend itself. The pupil is at that stage of development when if the beauty, or the glory, or the majesty of nature impress him with a deeper sense of feeling than ordinary and stir in him an uneasy longing to voice that feeling, he does not understand. His vigorous young life becomes impatient, nor is it quite at ease again until he has shaken off the uncanny feeling and has settled back into the well-known state. If he reads at all, it is the thrilling tale to which he turns. The actions of men, not their thoughts and feelings, interest him. He delights in exaggerations, in the unreal. Broad humor attracts him, but the rare touch of Addison or Thackeray is too delicate for his grasp. Pathos is bathos. I have seen a boy in his senior year wipe mock tears from his eyes, with wretched grimaces to waken a laugh on the part of the class, during the reading of the chapter that records the death of Colonel Newcome. And the pathetic *adsum* was to him only another point for ridicule. He was incredulous when he read that Thackeray himself felt so keenly the reality of his own creation that he burst into tears as he said to Lowell: "I have killed he colonel." Delineation of character or description of scenery, no matter how finely drawn nor in what glowing colors of truth and reality, he skips as tiresome. His eye has not seen. His ear has not heard. He cannot appropriate that which is wholly foreign to his interest.

Few have at this period seen life with so clear a vision that they are quick to detect the finer moralities. The decalogue they know by letter. They are not yet awakened to the spirit. Nor has the previous training of either home or church always impressed the later law of love.

I once heard a parent impute the fault to the teachers of her children that the children had never heard the name Beelzebub.

It did not satisfy her when she was good-naturedly told that the effort is to keep Beelzebub out of the schoolroom. But it was a bit of wicked satisfaction to one teacher, at least, when sometime afterwards these lines occurred in the day's lesson:

He preached to all men everywhere
The Gospel of the Golden Rule,
The New Commandment, given to men,

and the son of this parent did not know what was meant by the golden rule and had never heard of a new commandment. But, in justice to this young man, I should add that out of a class of nearly seventy pupils, although with the exception of a bare half dozen all attended Sunday school, but one knew anything of a new commandment, and the greater part of them knew nothing of the golden rule under that appellation. Where should the stricture lie?

Not only is the pupil entering the high school unable to appreciate the spirit of the literature that makes up so large a part of his English work there, but in many cases he is unable to grasp readily the thought of an ordinary sentence. To understand the barest statement of a fact is the limit of his ability. Let me cite an instance. The line, "Below the good how far, but far above the great," was dictated to a boy for the purpose of scanning. It was read to him twice, slowly and distinctly. He began, "Below the good *hell fire*," and there his line halted. Corrected, he proceeded to finish—"but far above the *grate*." Evidently there had been something in his religious training that had made an impression. This is perhaps an extreme case, but its indications are not to be mistaken. There is often little connection in the mind of the child between the words and the thought they express. He does not of himself command his mind to an understanding of that which is in itself too simple to need explanation.

Still another condition is the outside cry that the work is not practical. The successful business man who has won his way, not because of his lack of education, but in spite of it, and who sees life only in the sale of a bill of hardware or in the weighing out of domestic necessities, argues: "I have succeeded without

an education, and my child can." He has, on the surface, enough of reason to appeal to the child and to prejudice him beforehand against the work. "An education which shall keep a good coat on my son's back" is as much the popular cry in America today as it was in England when Ruskin penned the expression.

The newspaper at times asserts its influence and creates a public sentiment that frequently reacts upon the school management to restrict the English work and to hold in bonds the English teacher. A San Francisco paper some time ago, in commenting upon an examination that had been given by a professor of the State University to various high-school classes, which examination consisted of an extract from *Snow-Bound*, with questions as to meaning, imagery, and word defining, stated in effect that a child's well-being does not depend upon his knowledge of *Snow-Bound*. The average pupil nor his parent would be quick to recognize this statement as the first link in a chain which followed to its conclusion would, "by the rule that made the horsetail bare," eliminate *all* literature from the high-school course. This is one of the mildest of newspaper strictures, but even its effect was widespread and of such a nature that, under existing circumstances, the most vigorous school management, in full sympathy with the progress of the English work, would not be able to fully counteract it. The truth is that we are today in the midst of change that has been brought about by the requirements of the higher schools. It is in a measure a *forced* change, and there results, as always, a resistance to pressure.

To sum up, there is the previous preparation that has not prepared. The pupil is at that stage of development when he is attracted only by "lampblack and lightning," and has little sense for the finer vibrations of life. Home training and public sentiment are not always on the side of higher education.

The immediate remedy for these conditions is not in the hands of the high-school teacher. It is not a case where the axe may be laid to the root of the tree. But the existence of these conditions will, in large measure, account for the failure of English to keep the pace set by the university and college.

To leave the discussion at this point would be to imply that there are no conditions *within* the high school that may also be held responsible. This would be far from the truth. But such conditions are, for the most part, imposed by the inability of the teacher of English to handle the subject with the firm grasp of accurate and broad knowledge, and with the tact and judgment that will turn to use even the most adverse conditions, though too frequently the economy of the schoolroom itself presents other difficulties. It is true that no other school work brings such frequent discouragement or entails so much of drudgery upon the teacher. But if to him the situation is discouraging, what must it be to the pupil who is literally befogged?

The difficulty seems insurmountable when considered in the light of the demand that is being urged by the university and the college. But in no iota should this demand be lessened. Its pressure is exerted in every direction. Not only must the secondary school obey the mandate and advance to higher ground, but by transmitting the pressure it will compel a corresponding movement on the part of the grades. Not only must the teacher of English, who is bearing the heat and burden of the day, be better versed in all that pertains to his work, but the school management will be compelled to accord to English a consideration it has never before received. And then—who knows?—after many days the *home* may respond in such full measure that the use of pure English in speaking and writing will be the rule, not the exception.

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